

Wendy Sloane

Putin cracks down on media

Once again, Vladimir Putin is throwing his toys out of the pram – and this time even a toddler can see that he’s not playing fair. The country’s main media regulator, Roskomnadzor, has kept a tight rein on both domestic and foreign media outlets ever since the invasion of Ukraine in February, blocking those that “disseminate false information”. But now the Russian president has gone one step further, announcing that any country that either restricts or outright bans Russian propaganda could lose its journalistic accreditation, creating “a legal basis for Moscow to retaliate against the media of any country that restricts the activity of Russian journalists”, according to Reuters.

Can Putin really have his *tort* and eat it too? The answer is a resounding *da*. The further crackdown passed by the State Duma, the lower house of parliament, came after Russian officials threatened to retaliate when they said their journalists based in the US received “poor treatment”, according to news agencies. It follows Russia blocking or censoring another estimated 3,000 websites and independent news outlets, says the online freedom organisation Roskomsvoboda, after the Kremlin blacklisted many foreign correspondents who were based in the country, including some from the BBC and *The Guardian*. (Blocking is nothing new: Roskomsvoboda says the Kremlin blocked 200,000 websites in 2021.

“It’s so outrageous and absurd. It’s obviously Putin’s desperate attempt to keep control of the media and the narrative and is consistent with the crackdown across the board that we are seeing in Russia, with the arrest of people like Vladimir Mau,” says a western correspondent previously based in Moscow. Mau, a leading Russian liberal economist, was arrested on June 30 on charges of fraud, which the Russian opposition labelled part of Putin’s strategy to slow academic freedoms and control the education sector. His arrest, along with the draconian media laws, show “that there is increased

paranoia, and that Moscow will revert to something even worse than during the Cold War, when western journalists were allowed to operate, with restrictions,” adds the correspondent, who wanted to remain anonymous. “I am surprised that the BBC and Reuters have managed to keep going [inside Russia]. Whether or not this will make it impossible for them to stay, I don’t know.”

Mau’s is not the only high-profile recent arrest. In early July, a prosecutor asked that Aleksei Gorinov, a lawyer who openly criticised Moscow’s involvement in Ukraine, receive a seven-year prison sentence for spreading “false information”. Less than two weeks later, opposition activist Ilya Yashin was arrested for a YouTube video mentioning the “murder of civilians in Bucha”; he will stay in prison until at least September. The new laws are “part of Moscow’s increasing efforts to snuff out the last vestiges of dissent”, says the *Moscow Times*, adding that more than 16,000 people have been detained for protesting against the war as of mid-July, almost half of them women.

Subhead

Everything has become “stricter” inside Russia recently, says Pjotr Sauer, a Russia affairs correspondent for *The Guardian*, with Russians and foreigners who defy Putin facing different consequences. “There is definitely a crackdown now and it is steadily getting worse, not better. For foreign journalists it’s a threat, but for Russian journalists it’s less of a threat than a punishment, as they are actually jailing them,” he said in an interview from the Netherlands, where he has been forced to relocate temporarily.

But as Putin works to quell dissent, others are encouraging it, toiling behind the scenes to keep Russia’s internet free from complete state control. The US government-backed Open Technology Fund now provides free VPNs (virtual private networks) to Russians, while Radio Free Europe’s website features a “How to bypass blocking” section in Russian and English, with step-by-step instructions on how to use VPNs, download censorship-circumventing apps, and install Onion Router, open-source software to move online anonymously, free of charge.

The push appears to be working, as Sauer says there has been a “huge” increase in VPN downloads since the invasion. “While most of Russia’s news organisations have been blocked, they are still accessible through VPNs and through Telegram, which hasn’t been blocked. If you are Russian and you are

really curious, you can buy information, but you have to look for it and the majority of Russians don't. Mainly, only young Russians do, so most people get a very limited and skewed view of what is going on," he told me.

As a result, the generation gap in Russia is growing exponentially, adds Sauer, who grew up in Moscow as the son of Dutch journalists. "The majority of older people use television as their main source of information, and that is controlled by the government. Older people in Russia have always been more conservative, even before the war, and younger people are more critical of the government." Polls show that half of all young people are in favour of the war, with two-thirds of older people behind Putin, he said. "Polls are hard to do at the moment, as saying you are against the war is a criminal offence," he cautions.

The gap could widen even further, thanks to Putin's other tricks, such as banning the use of Ukrainian in some parts of occupied Ukraine in his quest to "help" the Russian-language majority there. Children in Mariupol have been told their summer holidays will be cancelled and they will be forced to learn Russian in preparation to enter Russian-language schools in the autumn, according to news reports. *The Washington Post* recently reported that the Kremlin is offering money to teachers in Russia to relocate to occupied parts of Ukraine by September to "give students there a 'corrected' education – with Russia's take on Ukraine's history".

Some observers are optimistic that truth will prevail. "People think totalitarianism means total control of the media. It is total control of the mass media, which is why the older generation supports the war. But the censorship is not total. The Kremlin cannot control the whole internet," says Jonathan Sanders, professor of communications and journalism at Stonybrook University and a former CBS News Moscow correspondent. After covering the armed school siege in Beslan, North Ossetia – an autonomous Russian republic in the North Caucasus – in 2004, Sanders has continued to follow news out of that region.

"I know how the war is going in Ukraine as I can see all the funerals and death notices on Instagram of North Ossetian boys who served in the [Russian] military," Sanders said. "What is worse for young people in Russia now is not rising prices, but the screaming arguments they have with their grandparents about what is going on." He relies on a VPN to watch the Russian state-controlled television Channel One in the US. "I used to be able to watch it on YouTube but now I have to pretend that I'm in Armenia to watch it, which in itself is quite horrifying. The fact that the Americans

are inhibiting things for an American analyst of the Kremlin is not exactly welcoming.”

The Caucasus is more welcoming, which is perhaps why the *Moscow Times* has relocated its main offices to Armenia after its Russian-language version was banned in Russia. Thomas de Waal, senior fellow of Carnegie Europe specialising in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, says Armenia has become “quite an attractive destination” for both foreigners and Russians as it’s relatively safe, digitally connected and not expensive – with an added bonus of nobody being detained there against their will. Russians find it relatively easy to use their credit cards there to access their bank accounts, and they’re not as disliked as they are in places such as Georgia and the Baltics, says de Waal, who is not fazed by the current media crackdown. “Russia has always been a badly run authoritarian country so people always slip through the cracks, so it doesn’t surprise me that they have been a bit slow in shutting down independent media. But now, a few months on, I guess the crackdown is more efficient and organised,” he says.

His Carnegie colleague, Russian journalist Andrei Kolesnikov, recently compared Putin to “all dictators and autocrats of the 20th century” in the Russian-language *New Times*. Why? They “maintained a cult of strength, militarism and heroic death” and also “refused on principle to allow a rotation of power, fought against ‘national traitors’, imprisoned their opponents, imposed censorship, and sought to rule forever”. Says de Waal: “All dictators are different. I guess Putin did not start off as one particularly, but the longer he stays in power, the longer he lives in his echo chamber where people tell him what he wants to hear. He has become fused with the state – that’s why he has become dangerous.”

Wendy Sloane worked as a journalist in Moscow from 1989 to 1995, writing mainly for Moscow Magazine, the Associated Press, The Daily Telegraph and Christian Science Monitor before becoming a magazine editor in the UK. She currently freelances for the London Economic, among others, and is an associate professor and the journalism course leader at London Metropolitan University.

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